We Are Family

Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees

Chapter I

London, Present Day

Laurie Vale had good intuition, but it still took her a while to admit to herself that this, her first private view in over a decade, might just be a success. Taking a moment to sip champagne in the corner of the small London gallery, Laurie surveyed her guests, who were milling around the brightly lit space, admiring the canvases she'd painstakingly mounted on the newly whitewashed brick walls. She felt too dizzy with exhaustion to be excited, but nevertheless, the rising hubbub of arty chit-chat, the clink of glasses, the steady movement of stilettos on the polished floorboards gave her a buzz of satisfaction. In the background the Cuban salsa CD she'd chosen tinkled merrily as a burst of laughter rose above the crowd.

Just in time for the party, as always, Roz, Laurie's agent, waved from the doorway, before swooping over to where Laurie was standing. She was wearing high boots and a floor-length sheepskin coat, neither of which showed any signs of having been subjected to the onslaught of dank February drizzle outside.

'Fantastic turnout,' Roz gushed, handing over a large bunch of pink roses. She towered above Laurie as she shrugged off her coat to reveal the shortest of black minidresses. 'The cabbie got completely lost. Does this really count as the East End?'

'It was all I could afford,' Laurie said apologetically, kissing her and taking the roses and her huge coat. 'Brick Lane's up the road . . . honest.'

Roz swiped a glass of champagne from a waiter with a tray, not missing the opportunity to size him up. 'Oh well. It doesn't matter. There must be about fifty people. Good for you.'

'Thanks, but I feel like I'm on one of those Faking It TV programmes,' Laurie admitted. 'I keep thinking there's a hidden panel of people waiting to see whether I mess up.'

'Don't be ridiculous. You're the real thing, honey. Any sales so far?'

'A few maybes,' Laurie said, looking around her for a place to put the flowers and Roz's coat. 'You see the guy over there in the tweed jacket?' She pointed to the far corner of the room, to where a man was standing, his forefinger tapping his lips as he talked to another buyer Laurie hadn't seen before. 'He's interested in the big sunset

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for some swanky new private members club in Soho.' Laurie nodded to the huge canvas of red and orange paint dominating the far wall. 'Maybe I've overpriced it.'

'Don't discount,' Roz advised. 'Stick to your guns.' Roz's eyes sparkled as she scoped the room. She loved this kind of event. 'Where's the toy boy?'

Toy boy was hardly a fair description of James. 'He's twenty-eight. That's old by your standards,' Laurie pointed out.

'But young by yours,' Roz said, counting on her long fingers. 'Six years.'

'Five and a half.'

'But haven't I always told you that younger men are where it's at?' Roz gloated. 'And James is divine, you lucky girl. I bet he's got so much stamina . . .'

Laurie shook her head. She wasn't going to be drawn into a discussion about her sex life, even though it was Roz's favourite subject.

'Anyway, he's so much better than you-know-who,' Roz added. 'Thank God you've got him out of your system at long bloody last.'

Laurie didn't dignify Roz's remarks with a comment. She knew she was only trying to be encouraging in her own way. Perhaps Roz thought enough time had passed since their fateful holiday for her to be honest. After all, it was three years ago that their group holiday had ended in that disastrous romance for Laurie. But it had taken those three years for Laurie to even consider dating someone else and, whatever Roz thought, Laurie wasn't ready to hear it. And especially not tonight. Not when everything was going so well.

'Look, I really should go and put these in water and get back to it,' Laurie said. 'Thanks for sending all the invites out and everything. You've done so much. Everyone has – Janey with the venue, Toby with the wine, even Heather's agency has lent me the staff for free. Moral support and all that, it's much appreciated.'

'Friends, darling – we're the new family,' Roz said, putting an arm around Laurie's shoulder and giving it a squeeze, before waving across the room at Janey and Heather.

Upstairs in the small kitchenette, Laurie filled up a plastic cup with water and took a moment to catch her breath. What was wrong with her? Why did she feel so hemmed in by the crowd downstairs? Especially when so many of her friends had come to support her. Maybe it was the contrast between working on her own for so long and now suddenly being publicly exposed which made her feel so unsure of herself.

She wished now that she'd let her father come, instead of deliberately putting him off. Why had she? she wondered. Because she was selfish and hadn't wanted to babysit for him? Because she was embarrassed by how ordinary he was? Or was it

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simply because inviting him alone would have made it too painful that her mother wasn't with him and she wanted to protect him from wellmeaning questions about his bereavement?

Laurie sipped the water, feeling guilty. She knew how much tonight would have meant to her mum. But she also knew if she was being really honest, that, her loss wasn't for Jean Vale, the woman who had finally slipped away nearly a year ago, having lived in a hazy world of her own. Laurie's loss was the ideal that she'd never had. The person she missed was her well-formed fantasy mother who would have been here tonight, graceful and elegant and making all her friends laugh. She missed the woman who would have publicly hugged Laurie, egged her on, given her confidence, bought one of her paintings and gently bullied other people into doing the same.

But Jean Vale hadn't been like that. Maybe she would have been if she hadn't been ill for years, slowly rotting from the inside, until it was almost unbearable to be near her. Laurie tipped the rest of the water away. She should have done more. She should have shouldered the burden instead of letting her father nurse and care for her mother, and, in the end, keep a bedside vigil beside her in the hospice.

She knew that his fierce determination that she should carry on with her life and not get involved in her mother's care arrangements had been a decision made out of love, but even so, Laurie still felt it as a rejection. It had made her feel as if she were being kept at arm's length, as if she were being protected from something she didn't need protecting from. It was the same feeling she'd had since her parents had sent her away to school when she was eleven.

Laurie sighed. It would all be so much easier if she had brothers and sisters – anyone to share the burden of grief she felt, but she'd always been entirely alone. Yet there was no point in wallowing in self-pity or wishing for anything different. She had her friends and she had her independence. And maybe Roz was right. Maybe her friends were better than family.

Laurie stared down at Roz's pink roses in the sink. She mustn't let her friends down. She'd been saying for ages that she was going to have one last stab at making a living out of her art, and now here she was with a chance to show the world that she was an artist. She mustn't blow it.

Laurie had no idea what time it was that James woke her the next morning, but as she swam up into consciousness from exhausted, alcohol-fuelled sleep, she was aware of her thighs being caressed. She grinned, stretching luxuriously towards James's tongue beneath the duvet.

Laurie sighed to herself, feeling herself becoming aroused, despite her headache. She wondered how many women James Cadogan had practised this particular wakeup exercise on, but she didn't care. In the three months they'd been seeing each other, she deliberately hadn't enquired about his past love life. And, more importantly, he hadn't enquired about hers. She was determined that this was going to be a baggage-free relationship – and so far, it was working.

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'Good morning,' he said, flinging back the duvet and gasping for air, ten minutes later, as Laurie slowly sank back in a post-orgasm sigh. He exhaled happily, his head thumping back on the pillow as he laid down next to her.

'Christ, I'm thirsty!' he said, sitting up immediately and scratching his mane of thick black hair, so that it stuck up at an even stranger angle. In a second, he'd thrown the duvet off and was standing up on the sheepskin rug by the side of his futon.

Laurie couldn't help snorting with laughter.

'What?' he asked, looking over his shoulder at her, a grin on his face.

She shook her head. There was no way she could explain to him why she found him so funny. Why she found his lack of seriousness so refreshing. She liked his attitude to sex, she realised, as she sat up and drew up her knees under the duvet. She liked the fact that he always treated it as yet another one of his – or in this case, her – physical cravings to be satisfied. Despite his trendy clothes and haircut and his blossoming career as a music producer, James, at heart, was as primitive as a caveman. Now that he'd scratched one particular itch, he was on to the next. The next being some form of liquid.

She watched his smooth buttocks, as he negotiated his way across the littered floor of his bedroom. He seemed completely happy within his own body, as if his naturally slim physique, with his long, lean legs and toned, svelte torso were the most obvious thing in the world. He probably didn't even consider for a second, she thought, how lucky he was to be so naturally good-looking and fit, and Laurie liked his lack of vanity.

She immediately checked herself. She'd vowed she wouldn't do this. She mustn't start overanalysing James or her feelings for him, or deconstructing the parts of his personality she liked and disliked, otherwise it was bound to go horribly wrong. Instead, she forced herself to concentrate on the present, piecing together the events that had led her to being in James's bed.

Now she remembered how he'd bundled her into a taxi at 4 a.m., after coffee and bagels in Brick Lane. She'd been too drunk and too tired after the exhibition to argue against staying at his, but she wished that she'd been more together. It wasn't that she didn't like sleeping with James, but she so much preferred doing it in her own bed.

She knew she was being a snob and that admittedly James had the largest room in his shared house, but even so, there was something steadfastly 'student' about the whole place, including its varying number of other inhabitants whom James had acquired without any sort of vetting process. Now she could hear the vague pitter-patter of someone playing bongos upstairs.

James's downstairs bedroom was large and draughty and entirely painted white, including the floorboards, but in a hurry, so that the whole effect was uneven and

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streaky, like a child's chalk scribble on a blackboard. At one end was a huge window, the curtains of which Laurie had never seen open. Beneath it was a jumble of wires and computers on a sagging desk, an electric guitar propped up against the wall. Piles of CDs and tapes teetered dangerously, while a hideous white wardrobe and chest of drawers took up the rest of the space, with clothes spilling out in every direction. There was a also a life-size cut-out of Elvis in his Vegas heyday, which made phallic shadows on the ceiling at night.

The rest of the room was taken up with the large sprawling futon in which Laurie now sat, surrounded by piles of books and magazines, dirty socks and three lava lamps, their wax suspended into weird foetal-like sculptures.

James returned with a bottle of Evian he'd found by the stereo in the corner.

'Want some?' he asked, after taking a sip and waving it towards Laurie.

'How old is it?' she asked, amused that she found it perfectly acceptable to share bodily fluids with James, but not a stale bottle of water.

James swallowed another mouthful with a big gulp and looked at the label on the bottle, as if it would give him some clue as to the vintage. 'Dunno,' he said. 'Not older than a couple of months.'

He wiggled his thick eyebrows at her, challenging her to take the bottle, but she shook her head. James shrugged and got in under the duvet, holding her tight. His feet were freezing as he put them on Laurie's legs.

'So, Miss Arty-Pants. How's the hangover?' he asked, cuddling her.

'I wish you hadn't mentioned it,' she said, feeling it kick in. She reached over him and lunged for the water, after all. As she did, she glanced at the small travel alarm clock on the floor. 'Oh shit,' she said, collapsing on James's smooth chest.

'What?'

'I'm supposed to meet Tamsin for breakfast.'

'Tamsin . . . Tamsin?' James was clearly searching for a face to fit the name.

'My flatmate,' Laurie said, fixing him with a long-suffering smile. She remembered all of his friends.

'Oh yes . . . blonde.'

Laurie rolled her eyes at him. 'I promised I'd meet her this morning. I've got to head home and shower.'

'Don't go,' James moaned sleepily, pulling her back down under the duvet. 'You can shower here.'

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'In your bathroom?'

'What's wrong with it?'

'Let's just say that I like my creature comforts more than you do. Call it an age thing. You know, you can get up and come too if you want. And then we could –'

But James had already closed his eyes and was pulling the duvet up around his chin. Laurie got out of bed pulling on her clothes from last night. They stank of stale smoke.

'I'll see you, sleepyhead,' she whispered, ruffling his hair, before kissing his forehead. 'Call me when you're conscious.'

Laurie admired Tamsin. She had done since they'd been friends at sixth-form college where they'd smoked, read poetry, painted their nails black and chased unsuitable boys. Since then, Tamsin had achieved a much more complete make-over than Laurie, holding down an impressive job as a law consultant, which involved her flying first class around the world. She even had a handsome airline captain as a boyfriend.

It was petite, blonde Tamsin, dressed in a blue cashmere jumper and gold jewellery, who sat down with Laurie for the post-mortem of the private view in their favourite café in Borough Market a couple of hours later. Laurie, meanwhile, was in paint-splattered jeans and no make-up, her wet hair pushed under a woolly hat.

'I mean, there were quite a few people interested, but no chequebooks flying about, apart from for the big sunset piece,' Laurie explained, 'but that was entirely thanks to Roz,' she added, as she slouched over the table and recounted the events of the night before.

'I wish I'd been there,' Tamsin muttered for the third time.

'Stop saying that,' said Laurie, stretching her arm across the table and touching Tamsin's arm. 'You couldn't help it that the flight was delayed. I know you would have been there if you could.'

'Can I at least buy a painting, to make it up to you?'

'Don't be ridiculous. My paintings are all over the flat as it is. There's no point in you buying one.' Laurie sat up as the waitress arrived with a large plate of banana pancakes with maple syrup. 'Talking of the flat, I think the shower is on the blink again. When I get some money from the exhibition – if I do – I think I'll decorate a bit, what do you say?'

Tamsin didn't reply. Instead, she sipped her latte from the glass. Then she wiped her finger along the edge of the table. Laurie caught her expression, as she loaded a

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forkful. Something in the delicate features of her friend's face made her put the fork down and wipe her mouth.

'OK, come on, spit it out,' Laurie tested, looking at Tamsin before sucking on the straw from her fresh-juice smoothie.

'What? Oh no. No, it's nothing, really.'

Laurie put the smoothie down. 'Is it something to do with Captain Mike?' Laurie said his name with a deep smooth voice and double chins. Usually, Tamsin shared the joke, but today she didn't laugh.

'We've decided to live together,' Tamsin blurted out.

'But . . . but I thought you'd only just . . .' Laurie stopped herself. She was about to say 'started seeing him', but who was she to be judgemental? If it was love, then of course Tasmin was going to move in straight away. She smiled and half stood and gestured for Tasmin to lean forward so that she could give her an awkward hug across the small table. 'Wow!' she said.

Tasmin squeezed her back. 'I know, isn't it great? I keep pinching myself.'

Laurie sat back down and smiled, but inside she felt sad. Another one bites the dust, she thought. She'd seen it happen with nearly all of her friends. In no time at all, there'd be an expensive wedding and then there'd be pregnancy and a baby and in less than a year Laurie would have nothing in common with her at all. Now, despite everything Laurie had said about the private view, she felt more in limbo than ever.

'So . . .' she said, looking at her plate, but her appetite had gone.

'I guess it's all change,' Tamsin said happily, with a shrug, launching forth on Mike's romantic proposal of cohabitation while she was in the cockpit of his 747 flying across the Alps.

But Laurie's mind was already racing ahead. She and Tamsin had bought their tiny flat together almost ten years ago. At the time, signing up for a joint mortgage with each other had seemed a lot safer than with any of the men either of them were dating. Besides, the flat was low risk and cheap and it was an arrangement that had suited them both over the years. And recently, with Tamsin spending more and more time away, Laurie had the flat mostly to herself. Now, the thought of trying to find lodger filled her with dread.

'So what are you going to do?' Laurie asked, bringing her friend gently back down to earth.

'Well, the thing is . . . I know you're hard up for cash. And I thought . . . Mike and I thought we could move into the flat together. Or you could buy me out instead?' Tamsin hurried on. 'If you want. And Mike and I could buy somewhere else and you could keep the flat.'

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Tamsin clearly felt guilty. She blushed furiously. Laurie stared at her, but she didn't meet her eye. They both knew that Laurie buying Tamsin out wasn't even a vague possibility.

'The point is, Laurie, that you've got your art underway now and well . . . I've been waiting for quite a while until you . . .'

'Until I what?'

'You know . . . felt more stable.'

Laurie was stunned. She felt as if she were being ditched by someone she considered to be her true friend. Even worse, she now felt embarrassed about all the times she'd confided in Tamsin. She'd thought that Tamsin was being supportive about her grief over her mother, her confusion over her love life and the direction of her career. Now Laurie realised she'd just been biding her time.

'I suppose it's best if you take the flat,' Laurie said. 'If that's what you want. I guess I'll move out.'

Tamsin smiled, clearly relieved. 'I knew you'd be brilliant about it. I've got it all sorted with a solicitor. It'll only take a month or so to swap over the paperwork, although I don't want to put you under any pressure.' When Laurie didn't say anything, she added, 'So what are you going to do? Where will you live?'

'I'll work something out.'

'That's you all over,' Tamsin laughed, drawing a line under the subject. 'You're so resourceful. You could always stay with James, couldn't you?'

Laurie could only manage a hollow smile. 'Er, no.'

There was a small pause.

'So. What are you doing next Sunday? Only, I've asked Mike's parents to come for lunch and I thought I'd cook it at home. You and James are very welcome to join us.'

'No. Thanks anyway, but I think I'll go over and see Dad.'

'How is he?' Tamsin asked, her voice full of sympathy.

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